One Day at a Time: Dylan Overcomes Depression & Melanoma

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Dylan was young and healthy. Until he wasn't. At 22, he'd been ignoring a mole beneath his left ear. His Mom had been on him for months to get it checked out — but hey, he was young and healthy. He didn't go to a dermatologist until his Mom actually made the appointment for him and gave him no choice.

Fortunately, they had caught it early. Dylan was diagnosed with stage 2 melanoma — and after surgery, required no further treatment. The resulting scar wasn't his only challenge. Just six months later, he was involved in a car accident that tragically killed a close friend. It was a low point in his life.

Angry, sad, and wrapped with guilt he started to do anything he could to escape; including drugs, alcohol, and binge eating. His grades cratered. "I was in a dark place," recalls Dylan. "I just didn't want to feel."

For months, this was Dylan's new normal until his friends became concerned that he may hurt himself and called his Mom. This wasn't the first time she was confronted with the prospect of suicide. Dylan's father — her first husband — died due to suicide 23 years prior just before Dylan was born.

She took him home and under her watchful care, Dylan's condition improved. He spent the semester recovering and found a baseball coaching gig for the summer. The reprieve was short lived.

That fall, Dylan noticed a strange golf-ball sized lump under his jaw. He tried to pretend that it wasn't there. "I knew full well what was going on," remembers Dylan. "I just wanted to not have cancer for a bit longer."

After many tests and scans, the prognosis wasn't good. He had tumors in his lungs, liver, neck, and in three places in his spine.

The numb feeling was back. “My survival mechanism was just to ignore things that were happening. I didn’t even flinch when the doctors told me I had less than a 15% chance of surviving.”

In a bid to buy time, Dylan enrolled into a clinical trial that combined ipilimumab with high-dose interleukin-2. The combination was brutal. He was admitted into the hospital for a week at time while receiving interleukin-2. He lost 35 pounds in a month and a half.

Despite the rollercoaster of treatment, Dylan was still struggling with his own mental health demons. When not in the hospital, he could frequently be found at a local bar.

“I felt unstoppable. I was living like I was dying. The odds were so against me that no one could tell me how to live otherwise,” says Dylan.

Back in the hospital’s Intensive Care Unit (ICU), Dylan began to take note of the people around him as they came and went. As he lay watching — with his own organs failing — a woman near him died. He saw how her family and friends shared the last few minutes with her and consoled each other with stories about her life after her passing. This experience really hit him.

“I kept thinking about how people would remember me if I died. I went from being a leader in the community to a person who was just so lost. So I decided to make a change.”

Dylan was told by a mentor in his life that not only would he get through this, that he’d inspire others by sharing his story someday. He liked how this sounded — and he decided that if he was going to share the story, he wanted it to be a good one.

“There were so many things that were outside of my control, so I decided to focus on the things that I could do something about,” says Dylan. “Cancer taught me to stay in the moment and to tackle things one day at a time.”

The experimental treatment was working. After six weeks, only 2 small tumors remained.

Once again, the reprieve was short lived.

Fortunately, the melanoma treatment landscape had changed. In addition to the checkpoint immunotherapy ipilimumab which Dylan took earlier, PD-1 based drugs were now available. He began monthly infusions with pembrolizumab (Keytruda) — and was able to regain some normalcy in his life.

The treatment worked. Within 2 months, he was deemed no evidence of disease (NED). He continued his monthly infusion for just eleven additional months.

Now melanoma free, Dylan wanted to give back. He quit drinking, started to eat better, and began working out. He started to share his story at local cancer symposiums and at universities. He also started his own weekly podcast series, Stage Four 2 on Stage.

“I interview people who’ve risen above some sort of adversity in their life,” says Dylan. “I try to show that while bad things may happen to us…they don’t define us.”

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http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/one-day-time-dylan-overcomes-depression-melanoma